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Oswald Humanities: Critical Research First Place: Maternal Masochism: Self-Degradation of the Mother in Morrison's "Beloved"

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Maternal Masochism: Self-Degradation of the Mother in Morrison's *Beloved*

Perhaps oftentimes it is not referenced directly, but hardly a work of Gothic fiction can be read without at least the suggestion of masochism. There must always be some Catherine Earnshaw starving herself out of spite or some Victor Frankenstein consciously deciding to neglect the dangerous creature of his own creation. Masochism has become a staple of the Gothic style, and this fixture has, like so many others, taken the journey across the pond from Britain to make its own way in America. Naturally, over the course of time masochism has seen an evolution of meaning pulled far away from our original understanding of the word. I will first provide a basic overview of this evolution and then offer my own spin to the critical theory by developing a branch of the subject that I will call, “maternal masochism,” which I argue is the basis of the feminine masochism. I will demonstrate the qualities of this particular brand of enjoying the self-infliction of pain by employing Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved*.

Our basic understanding of the term masochism is shown in the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition: “The urge to derive pleasure, esp. sexual gratification, from one’s own pain or humiliation; the pursuit of such pleasure” (“Masochism”). However, how did it come to be this way? The term masochism itself was not born until 1886 in Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, in which it was described to be a “peculiar perversion of the sexual life in which the individual affected, in sexual feeling and thought, is controlled by the idea of being completely and unconditionally subject to the will of a person of the opposite sex” (Krafft-Ebing 86). In *Psychopathia Sexualis*, masochism was defined, but Krafft-Ebing’s understanding of this topic came from Sacher-Masoch’s novel *Venus in Furs* (1870), in which a man is overcome with his desire to be sexually enslaved by a woman (Pender 96). Masoch’s name transformed into the

term to legitimize and concretize the ideas presented in *Venus in Furs*, and thus he is forever associated with the sexual enjoyment of pain.

Even the popular neurologist who developed the concept of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, has contributed his very extensive two-cents to the developing theory of masochism. In 1919, Freud connected masochism to his Oedipal theory in “A Child is Being Beaten,” by stating that a child finds pleasure in the un-pleasure of being beaten by the man he so hates, his father. Still, though, we cannot avoid the connections between masochism and sexuality, as these stages of childhood, at least with Freud, are implicitly connected to erotic pleasure. However, Freud himself edited his understanding of the masochism only five years after “A Child is Being Beaten” with “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” in which he defines three very distinct forms of masochism: erotogenic (sexual excitement from physical pain), feminine (a woman’s longing to be beaten), and moral (the punishment of the ego by the superego). He claims that in all three versions of masochism, a sexual perversion transforms into a “norm of behavior,” and we are yet again only limited to the sexual realm (Nicol 150). However, this term must have moved away from the sexual at some point, because our OED definition states that masochism comes *especially* from sexual gratification, but it does not state that it is *always* derived from a sexual encounter.

We finally see this *truly* alternative form of masochism, which at last pulls away from the term’s original meaning when set down by Krafft-Ebing, at the start of the 20th century. In his “Melancholy Magic: Masochism, Stevenson, Anti-Imperialism,” author John Kucich explains that the reorganization of the middle class during the early 20th century allowed for a reconsideration of the term (Kucich 365). From this time period, as Kucich understands it, masochism comes to be considered as a universally relevant topic that entails many different

sorts of behaviors, all not necessarily sexually derived. Most interesting of his entire argument is Kucich's individual contribution to our understanding of the evolution of masochism. The desire and enjoyment of pain, Kucich claims, comes from "infant megalomania," in which an infant misunderstands a parental figure and in their mind destroys that figure out of fury; this destruction can come from several types of fury, like the anger a baby feels for not immediately getting his or her bottle. The figure of the parent, as the child grows older, is rebuilt through "guilt and self-punishment" (Kucich 374). In this self-punishment is a poorly understood enjoyment, as the child both feels he or she deserves to be guilty and also that this punishment preserves the omnipotence of the parental figure that they have come to respect.

This is by no means where masochism's evolutionary road meets its end. There are side-roads one can take along the journey; there arise nuances of each section of masochism that we have passed to reach where we stand now that can be transformed into their own distinct and well-understood forms of self-punishment. Here, however, at this fascinating concept of a masochism formulated from child-parent relationships, is where I veer from the straight path and explore a road less traveled. Although a maternal type of masochism is addressed elsewhere and to some extent, I find the concept itself to be underdeveloped, as the concept of maternity is oftentimes attached to Freud's moral masochism and not given room enough to breathe on its own.

As mentioned before, maternal masochism is never considered alone but instead serves as a precursor to Freud's moral masochism, in which the superego punishes the ego. However, this subset of masochism must be considered individually to understand what it contributes to the Gothic genre. The maternal masochism, indeed, is a separate entity with its own platforms of pleasure from self-degradation. As Freud asserted in his "The Economic Problem of

Masochism,” I heartily concur that maternal masochism is a perversion that has transformed into normality. However, unlike Freud, I do not find that this perversion must at all be of a sexual nature (although, of course, it *can* be). Additionally, I intend to demonstrate that Freud is incorrect to define “the feminine masochism” solely as finding its basis in a woman’s desire to be beaten. This understanding is too basic and indeed, it is much too Freudian in that it centers on a woman’s jealousy of man and her belief that he should beat her. Instead, I argue that the feminine masochism finds its basis in a distortion of maternal instinct. No work of Gothic literature displays this distorted maternal instinct better than Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987), which centers on a predominantly female African-American household immediately after the end of the Civil War. This novel not only provides us with a very serious perversity of maternal obligation through Sethe’s committal of infanticide, but it also situates us within the American Civil War backdrop, in which we encounter a singularly important “Other” of the American Gothic genre: the slave. Sethe is both a slave and a mother, and her unique, conflicting roles will not only help us better understand the maternal masochism, but it will also allow us to hear the voice of one of the United States’ most prominent “Others”.

Sethe is a specifically relevant enactor of the maternal masochism because her journey throughout *Beloved* is split into three distinct (although disjointed) sections that illuminate a sort of maternal process: longing, protection, and guilt. These sections make clear the “pain and joy, suffering and healing, death and new life,” that “are so tightly bound together than one cannot exist without the other” in the maternal sphere (Cullinan 78). Although Sethe’s model is certainly not the only one nor is it the standard, it does provide us an interesting means through which we can see these distortions of maternal instinct in action.

Sethe's journey towards maternal masochism, and perhaps the journeys of her daughters Denver and Beloved as well, begins with her longing for some sort of maternal figure.

Oftentimes, Sethe expresses a possibly incorrectly-assessed understanding of her own mother's motives, and she articulates a desire to be nursed by a mother that she has never met more than twice in her life. "There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left" (Morrison 236). Sethe's desire to provide milk to her children directly reflects the longing she felt for a closer attachment with her mother in her youth. Several times she proudly boasts about providing her daughter with milk: "All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me," and "I managed to have milk for [her] and to get it to her even after they stole it" (Morrison 19, 236). Sethe seems to be implicitly hinting that her mother had not lived up to her maternal duties and that Sethe is determined to be better and truer to her responsibilities. Beyond this, Sethe's comment about her lack of milk as a child also quietly suggests a sort of ownership of the mother by the child. Sethe did not have possession of her mother's milk and therefore did not have possession of her mother. Her undying desire to provide milk to her daughter signifies a strange desire to be owned by her children.

In this stage, Sethe is not in the position of the mother but rather that of the child. Her yearning to be loved by her mother is eerily similar to the same need of both Beloved and Denver to have their mother's love. When Paul D. first arrives at 124, Denver feels an overwhelming sense of losing her mother. She admits that her brothers' leaving and Baby Suggs's death could never really have an effect on her as long as Sethe were around. "None of that had mattered as long as her mother did not look away as she was doing now, making Denver long, downright *long*, for a sign of spite from the baby ghost" (Morrison 15). Beloved, too,

desires nothing more than to be with her mother and receive all her attention and love, even going so far as to walk miles to meet Sethe immediately after work. “She don’t love me like I love her,” she tells Paul D, “I don’t love nobody but her” (Morrison 137). The longing both daughters feel for their mother, just as their mother felt for her own, suggests a cyclical pattern. A longing for a relationship with a maternal figure, then, may be the first step towards one’s own committal of maternal masochism, in order to compensate, and oftentimes overcompensate, for these earlier denials of love.

Sethe’s “too thick” love for her children, possibly a response to the lack of love she received as a child, is very much in tune with Kucich’s connections between guilt as a child and self-punishment as an adult (Morrison 193). It could be, perhaps, that Sethe does not want to admit that the little attention she experienced as a child was her mother’s fault, because she sees their situation in the context of slavery, which of course must be considered. However, Sethe too faces the inhibiting effects of a slave life, but somehow manages to provide for her children the precious milk that she finds to be so crucial to their relationship. In her essay “Unspeakable Plots,” author Marianne Hirsch comments that, “the economy of slavery circumscribes not only the process of individuation and subject-formation, but also heightens and intensifies the experience of motherhood- of connection and separation” (242). Sethe’s ability to provide for her children despite slavery is, then, both a reprimand of her mother’s inability to care for her properly *and* a demonstration of Sethe’s maternal superiority, which creates a guilt that she at some point must address.

This incredible connection to her children through longing leads directly to the next and more punishing stage of her maternal masochism: protection. Sethe’s masochism through protection begins with her desperate attempts to provide breast milk to both Denver and Beloved.

She leads herself through a grueling and painful journey to get to her children and judges her success based on whether or not she is able to feed them. However, the most significantly masochistic act Sethe commits for maternal motivations is the murder of her daughter. One may question whether or not Sethe felt any sort of pleasure from the pain she inflicts on herself by killing her daughter, but through close analysis, there can be no doubt that she acts in an explicitly masochistic way. The pain of killing her daughter (and harming her other children) need hardly be mentioned. First, by destroying Beloved, Sethe is killing a part of herself. Indeed, she “defines herself as a maternal body” and losing the object of that maternity is therefore equated to losing herself (Wyatt 474). Secondly, Sethe knows that she is sending herself either back to slavery or to prison, and her horrible memories of Sweet Home and schoolteacher, like losing her milk or leaving without her husband, force this experience to be painful.

The pleasure of Sethe’s act, however, comes from the salvation of her daughter. In the chapter dedicated to Sethe’s direct thoughts, she states, “She [Beloved] come back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing. ...She had to be safe and I put her where she would be” (Morrison 236). Clearly, Sethe feels pride in her act. She almost *boasts* of it, in a way of displaying the maternal significance of her otherwise unpardonable act. When explaining what she had done to her children to Paul D. she claims, “It’s my job to know what is [worse] and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that” (Morrison 194). Sethe feels proud of what she has done for Beloved by keeping her away from the cruel world of slavery that crippled her youth. The pain Sethe feels for losing her daughter delights her nearly as much as it terrorizes her, because she finds herself torn between the culpable murderer and the proud protector. She believes it to be her duty to protect her children, even beyond the norm, and it is this over-response to maternal obligation that causes Sethe’s greatest misery. More importantly, it is

infanticide that brings the greatest joy of Sethe's life; to her, it is the ultimate proof that she is a *good* mother.

What I consider to be the final, although not necessarily the culminating, stage of Sethe's maternal masochism is the guilt she addresses throughout the novel for having committed infanticide. Although Sethe is clearly proud of what she has done, as I have already noted, she must face the lingering relics of her past life as physical manifestations and constant reminders of her guilt. At the beginning of the novel, Sethe expresses her contentment living with the "rebuked" crawling-already? baby ghost's presence at 124 by saying, "No moving. No leaving. It's all right the way it is" (Morrison 16). However, it is obvious that the presence of the ghost must conjure up painful memories from the past, but Sethe enjoys that awkward space in between the sadness of her past and the happiness of being constantly accompanied by the ghost of the daughter she murdered. Likewise, she allows Beloved to enter into her home and destroy her relationships with Paul D. and Denver that seemed to be improving based on their family-like outing together to the carnival, at which, "[t]hey were not holding hands, but their shadows were" (Morrison 56). That ever-growing connection was immediately disrupted by Beloved's presence. She interrupts any preexisting relationship between Sethe and Denver and slowly pushes Paul D. out of 124 into the adjoining shed. Eventually, he leaves altogether.

However, the greatest example of the maternal masochism in *Beloved* comes at the end of the novel. "But once Sethe had seen the scar... the little curved shadow of a smile in the kootchy-kootchy-coo place under her chin- once Sethe saw it, fingered it and closed her eyes for a long time, the two of them cut Denver out of the game" (Morrison 282). By tracing the scar she had created on her dead daughter's neck and closing her eyes in reflection, Sethe allows all sense to disappear, and she envelops herself in guilt. She wastes away her life-savings to buy

extravagant gifts for Beloved, constantly smiling and happy despite the fact that she's destroying her livelihood. Beloved is a physical manifestation of the selfishness of the child that requires constant attention and nurturing from its mother. Beloved takes advantage of her mother's guilt to secure her own happiness, and the more she takes from her mother, "the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through for her children" (Morrison 284). Beloved uses Sethe's guilt to exploit the past for her own selfish purposes.

Although *Beloved* is fictitious, Sethe's own maternally fueled masochistic tendencies speak true to the reality of the situation. The perverseness of the condition she finds herself in, a mother who murders her own child, indeed transforms into a norm at 124, just as Freud predicts in his understanding of masochism. Nothing can be more natural there than the angry spirit of her two-year old child that haunts the home. And yet, we can clearly understand the perversion of maternal tendencies by seeing Sethe's perspective. Her position as a slave has created for her a childhood of false hopes and unreasonable expectations of her mother that any daughter might feel. The longing one feels for a deep connection with one's mother can transform, as it did for Sethe, into a perversity of maternal obligation. Sethe's experiences with a weak mother figure lead her to formulate for herself the ultimate mother, who will go to any lengths to protect her child. This overprotection then transforms into guilt, from which one derives their greatest pain and their greatest joy.

Maternal instinct easily distorts into masochistic tendencies. For the sake of her child, a mother may commit heinous acts. From these acts, the maternal figure derives both the utmost pain and the greatest pleasure. Her willingness to cause herself pain by destroying (or by simply displeasing, to speak in a less exaggerated tone) a part of the self (if, indeed, a mother defines

herself by her maternal role, as Sethe does) directly leads to the most pleasurable sensation a mother can experience: that she has acted in a way that solidifies her as a *good* mother.

Sethe's intense involvement in the maternal masochism grants her a spot among even the greatest Gothic self-harmers. Morrison's unusual narration of a mother's perspective highlights the masochistic tendencies of the mother. Furthermore, Morrison puts voice to an otherwise ignored member of the American past: the slave. The effects of slavery on the role of motherhood, as shown through Sethe's eyes, demonstrate for us the complicated process of the maternal masochism, through the stages of longing, protection, and guilt. Indeed, Morrison depicts such a powerful masochistic mother-daughter relationship that the maternal masochism can no longer be considered as a precursor to moral masochism but instead a complex form of self-degradation of its own right.

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